

Rethinking Approaches to Peace-Building and Political Settlements in an Increasingly Urbanised World

Violence in cities significantly compromises development and can have detrimental consequences for peace-building and political settlements in both conflict and non-conflict settings. A majority of the world's most fragile and conflict-affected countries are rapidly urbanising, while much of the global burden of armed violence can be directly or indirectly linked to cities. As such, urban environments interact with the mechanics of security provision in significant and complex ways. Implementing effective violence mitigation strategies therefore requires stakeholders to acknowledge varying types of urban violence, understand how these interact with the mechanics of security provision, and thereby bring a spatially relevant, city-specific thinking to the wider understandings of the arrangements by which political power is organised and exercised.

Violence as a defining characteristic of urban living

The majority of the world's population now live in urban areas, and more than half of all urban dwellers live in small- to medium-sized cities. Nearly all of the urban growth expected in the coming two decades is projected to occur in the developing world, with the urban population in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, two of the world's poorest regions, expected to double. The share of the poor living in urban areas is rising, and in a number of countries, it is rising more rapidly than the population as a whole. The urban share of poverty in eastern Asia is nearly 50 per cent, while a quarter of those living in poverty in sub-Saharan Africa are found in urban locations. This implies that one in seven people worldwide live in poverty in urban areas.

Violence is also a defining characteristic of urban living in both conflict and non-conflict settings. Of the world's 31 most fragile and conflict-affected countries, 23 are projected to be significantly urban in the near future (see Figure 1 overleaf).

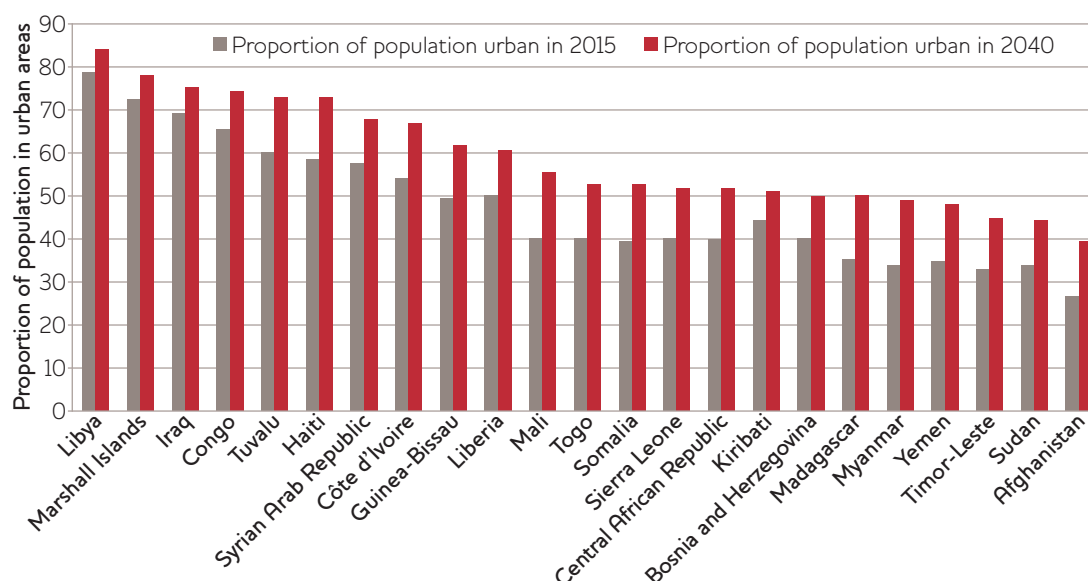
At the same time, fatalities due to armed violence in non-war settings far outweigh war-related deaths, and much of this violence is located in cities.

Just as there are multiple forms of war-related violence, forms of urban violence in non-conflict settings range by virtue of their motivations (e.g. economic, political, criminal), their pathologies (e.g. armed, physical, sexual, or psychological), by the nature of the victims (e.g. gender-based, or youth) as well as the nature of the perpetrators (e.g. by a gang, or a mob). The relative prominence of these characteristics is context-specific, with sociocultural norms and prevailing notions of what it means to live well in a city, playing as important a role as the locations in which violence is perpetrated (e.g. mega-city versus small towns; inner-city versus periphery).

The ways these forms of urban violence interact have important consequences not only for people's experiences of poverty and vulnerability, but also for the processes of peace-building and political settlements in both conflict and non-conflict settings.

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Figure 1 Most fragile and conflict-affected countries projected to be at least 40 per cent urban by 2040



Source: Calculated by author, based on data from *World Urbanization Prospects: the 2014 Revision* (United Nations 2014) and *Harmonized List of Fragile Situations* (World Bank 2015).

How urban violence impacts people's everyday experiences

Urban violence is shaped by and shapes the physical and social landscapes of urban communities. For example, fear of violence prompts the physical separation of high-violence neighbourhoods from surrounding areas, and can force women, men and children to adapt their daily life to avoid areas prone to violence on their way to work, around their homes, or when they play. Beyond the psychological impacts of such circumstances, adapting one's way of living in this manner usually also has a direct financial cost resulting out of the need to build barriers, take longer routes to work, or forego livelihood opportunities due to safety concerns.

How urban violence impacts political settlements and governance institutions

Even though inter-state warfare is in decline, the state continues to be one of several actors involved in both producing and mitigating violence, alongside local, non-state and other sovereign groups. Recent research points out that such violence is increasingly located in urban centres. Urban violence, in this context, cannot only be seen as a periodic segment of wars. When the violence of war does occur in urban areas, it is invariably indicative of changing strength ratios between rebels and government. Even if cities and towns are not the actual location of war, control over them can often be the objective. We also know that violence against civilians during civil wars now occurs predominantly in urban areas, and urban inhabitants can therefore become targets that need to be continually tracked and controlled, even after the onset of peace. Political settlements, or the arrangements by which political power is organised and exercised, during or post-conflict therefore have a distinct connection with the urban space.

Moreover, the forms of violence associated with war or armed conflict are not the only significant forms of urban violence today. In fact, the destructive impacts of criminal and everyday violence can be more acute than those experienced in traditional war. By far one of the largest aspects of the global burden of armed violence is homicide that occurs in *non-conflict or non-war settings*. Such violence negatively impacts governance institutions at the city- and national level through an erosion of trust in the social contract between the State and its citizens, wherein the credibility of institutions and the legitimacy of their actions is no longer seen as valid.

Why our understanding of peace-building and political settlements is compromised

The dynamics of violence and the mechanics of its mitigation are central concerns in policy, practice and research on peace-building and state-building. And yet, locating that violence within urban environments and applying a city-specific lens has not, to date, received much attention. This is due to two factors:

- **The separation between development theory or urban planning, and issues of fragility due to conflict and violence.** These have usually been different understandings and operational domains, to the detriment of a comprehensive approach to either analysis of fragility and violence or effective approaches to security provision. Furthermore, as issues of violence and order in cities are important in both conflict and non-conflict settings, dividing responses debilitates long-term interventions, as well as more comprehensive understandings of the processes of state-building.
- **Paucity of evidence:** More than half of the world's urban population resides in relatively small towns and cities with fewer than

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500,000 inhabitants. Some of these towns are rapidly growing into large cities. However, current evidence of experiences of violence and order on the one hand, and the mechanics of security provision on the other, from these locations continues to be relatively thin.

A hands-on approach to incorporate relevant city-specific dimensions

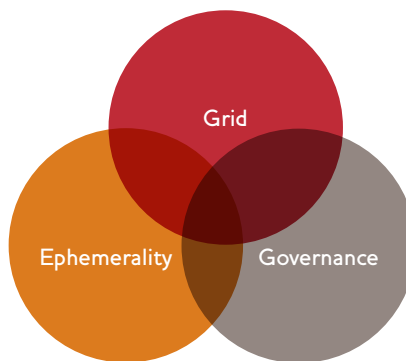
Approaches to peace-building and political settlements can use the following three city-specific dimensions as starting points to engage with urban issues:

- **‘Grid’** – paying attention to how city spaces, their layout and planning, as shaped by economic, political, technological, social and gendered factors, might impact the nature of violence that may or may not occur.
- **‘Governance’** – focusing on the processes and structures that form the institutions through which people are excluded and included in cities.
- **‘Ephemerality’** – recognising the shifting dynamics and identities of violence, which are often related to the grid and governance of the city, but not reducible to them.

This framework is useful to not only systematise thinking about cities in terms of each of the three dimensions, but importantly to widen the focus to include the intersection of two, or more, dimensions. It can, for example, be used to systematise our understanding of what the main drivers of violence and order in cities are, without reducing these to a simplistic value judgement – i.e. ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ or ‘positive’ versus ‘negative’.

For a recent IDS study on ‘Cities, Violence and Order’, a group of urban experts and

Figure 2 Three dimensions of cities

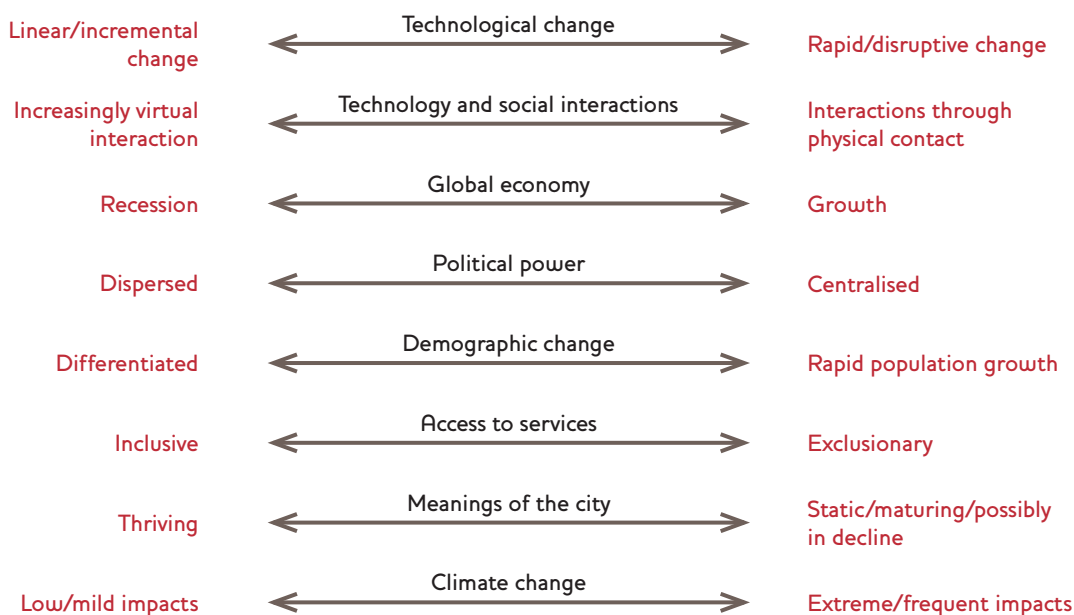


leading thinkers representing a broad range of disciplinary perspectives, employed this approach to identify what the drivers of violence and order in cities might be in the near future (see Figure 3). Understanding these drivers has particular relevance to mega-cities such as Mumbai and Rio de Janeiro, as they continue to change, but is important also for smaller towns and cities, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected countries, that are projected to accommodate more than 500,000 residents. As such, the list of drivers can be fine-tuned depending on local contexts.

Varying combinations of these slider-scales can be used to produce characterisations of what cities might look like in the future. Following this, potential policy responses to everyday violence or armed conflict can be placed within these characterisations to provide a meaningful assessment of how the interventions might operate and what long-term impacts they might have. This material can then be supplemented with expert consultations across a wide range of donors, practitioners and academic experts to identify key biases and blind spots in research, policy and practice.

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Figure 3 Potential drivers of change characterising future cities



Policy recommendations

Effective and inclusive development interventions, particularly in fragile contexts, will require that donors and other stakeholders engage not only on issues of peace-building, but also on issues of everyday security to:

- **See cities as central** to peace-building interventions and building political settlements. Useful starting points in this regard are to focus on: (1) the 'grid' or the spatial design, layout and planning of the city to determine how these interact with the nature of violence and conflict; (2) how the city is governed to determine the institutions that exclude and include people; and (3) the complex characteristics of the violence that occurs within these city spaces and institutions, with a particular focus on the gendered dimensions that shape everyday realities of those living with violence or in conflict settings.
- **Set clear guidelines for policy responses and intervention to recognise different types of violence, particularly in the face of the varied nature of the experiences of violence and 'everyday insecurity' for city dwellers.** Violence might occur 'on cities' (as in cities coming under siege). But it might also occur 'in cities' (where violence is located in urban settings, but almost by circumstance), or it may be 'inherent to cities' (where violence and conflict are structurally related to the city; and even become ingrained in the everyday fabric of urban life). While the three levels are interconnected, they also present significantly different challenges in terms of entry points for violence mitigation strategies.
- **Consider identifying urban futures that are possible, probable, and preferable.** Future scenario-planning approaches are useful in helping to assess the nature of future challenges, the types of policy response these might necessitate, and the potential long-term impacts of these interventions. Integrating urban futures within the frameworks of peace-building and political settlements in a rigorous and systematic way is essential as the world continues to urbanise, particularly in the most fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

In order to act effectively on these recommendations, further research is required to strengthen evidence on:

- **The characteristics of violence, including its perpetration, victimisation and prevention, in small but growing towns.** More than half of the world's urban population currently live in small towns of less than 500,000 people. Some of these towns will grow into large cities in the near future. While some of these growing towns and cities, such as Juba (South Sudan) or Buenaventura (Colombia), already feature in the research agendas on violence and order, others such as Lubango (Angola), Herat (Afghanistan), Pokhara (Nepal) or Muzaffarpur (India), continue to be hidden from view. These are all locations where there are growing concerns over violence and order, ranging from the increasing presence of gang and criminal activity in Pokhara, to violent evictions in Lubango, and social unrest and mob violence in Muzaffarpur. A richer evidence base from such locations is required to enable comprehensive planning with timely interventions.
- **The nature of day-to-day municipal governance.** Municipalities will continue to be on the frontlines of how urban security is conceptualised and delivered; therefore, understanding how they operate is vital. Future studies should go beyond reviewing simple statistics of violent crime and examine the drivers, responses and outcomes associated with both state and non-state security provision. This includes, for example, the destabilising factors that urban pressure can bring to national politics, and the positive element that this might have on forcing greater accountability on political elites. It might also include identifying and analysing instances where citizens have created their own service systems, or hybrid arrangements, which reflect the ways in which governance failures have impacted local communities.

Further reading

Graham, S. (2011) *Cities Under Siege: The New Military Urbanism*, New York: Verso

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Credits

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